

When did Vesuvius erupt?

Melvin Cooley

There are not many dates from antiquity of which we can reckon to be absolutely sure, but the date of the eruption of Vesuvius is one of them. Or so scholars have always thought. But although a contemporary writer tells us what the date was, the date he gives can be shown to be incompatible with the archaeological evidence. Melvin Cooley investigates.

Donna Noble: *What time does Vesuvius erupt? When's it due?*

The Doctor: *It's 79 A.D., 23rd August, which makes Volcano Day ... tomorrow.*

The date of the eruption of Vesuvius is well known, and comes on the best authority, not Dr Who in *The Fires of Pompeii*, but the famous letter of Pliny the Younger to his friend the historian Tacitus, describing the death of his uncle.

nonum kal. Septembres hora fere septima... *'On 24 August in the early afternoon...'*

Now, however, that date (which coincidentally, perhaps too coincidentally, was the festival of Vulcan) may be proved wrong. The crucial evidence comes from a group of coins (180 silver *denarii* and 40 gold *aurei*) being carried by a group of fugitives which was found on 7 June 1974 in the 'House of the Bracelet', destroyed and sealed by the eruption.

What the coins say

Modern British coins carry the name of the monarch and her (or his) abbreviated titles. So too did Roman coins. One of the silver *denarii* carries the following coin legend:

IMP(erator) TITUS CAES(ar)
VESPASIANUS, P(ontifex)
M(aximus)

Emperor Titus Caesar Vespasian,
Chief Priest

CO(n)S(ul) VII P(ater) P(atriae),
TR(ibunicia) P(otestate) VIII,
IMP(erator) XV

Consul seven times, Father of his Fatherland, holding tribunician power for the ninth time, acclaimed victorious commander fifteen times.

Titus became emperor on the death of his father, Vespasian, on 23 June, A.D. 79. Like Julius Caesar, Augustus, and all subsequent emperors he was *pontifex maximus* – chief priest. Titus had been consul in A.D. 70, 72, 74, 75, 76, 77, 79, and started his eighth consulship on 1 January, A.D. 80. *Pater Patriae*, 'Father of his Fatherland' was an honorary title bestowed on Augustus and adopted by many subsequent emperors on their accession. 'Tribunician Power' was another title and power first adopted by Augustus. It served to mark out the emperor and his closest associate and was renewed each year. Titus was first awarded this power by his father Vespasian in A.D. 71, and he renewed it for the ninth time on 1 July, A.D. 79.

No problems so far: the coin must have been minted after Titus began his ninth year of holding tribunician power which was very shortly after he became emperor and before he started his ninth consulship. In other words in the second half of the year which we now call A.D. 79. (The fact that the Romans might have thought of it as 832 AUC – since the founding of the city – makes no difference to the date.)

When was Titus proclaimed 'Imperator' for the fifteenth time?

But 'Imperator XV' changes things considerably. This refers to a military commander (or commander-in-chief) being saluted by troops after a victory in battle. Titus had gained some salutations as actual commander, and others, like his fifteenth, as emperor and commander-in-chief, for the victories of Agricola in Britain. Therefore, unlike some of the titles, the date of a salutation as *imperator* cannot often be precisely established, nor predicted in advance by a moneyer. However, two other known, and datable, inscriptions give dates in Titus' seventh consulship (i.e. in A.D. 79) at which he is

described as having had only fourteen salutations. So the coin at Pompeii showing fifteen salutations must date from later in A.D. 79 than these documents.

The first is this bronze tablet giving a copy of a letter sent by Titus to the local council at Munigua in Spain. Titus' official titles are given as holder of tribunician power for the ninth time, acclaimed victorious commander fourteen times, consul seven times. The document is dated 7 September (seven days before the Ides of September). The second document is a soldier's diploma of discharge from military service, found in Egypt, now in the British Museum. This gives exactly the same titles of Titus and a date of 8 September.

From these two completely independent inscriptions it is clear that Titus must have received his fifteenth salutation as *imperator* some time after 8 September A.D. 79, that the coin found in Pompeii must have been minted after that, brought to a still flourishing town several days later at least, and only then buried by Vesuvius. A date for the eruption, weeks if not months later than 24 August, does not, in fact, surprise archaeologists. Various archaeological data, including the discovery of autumn produce such as pomegranates, chestnuts, dried figs, grapes, as well as rugs and braziers, suggested to archaeologists as long ago as the eighteenth century that the third-century historian Cassius Dio was right in saying that the event happened in autumn (though wrong about much else). So too does the more recent discovery of large vats storing newly-pressed wine.

Could Pliny have got it wrong?

How could Pliny have made such an error, mistaking not only the day, but misremembering the season? The answer is almost certainly that he is not to blame, but rather the process by which classical texts have been preserved. In Roman and Medieval times, before the invention of the printing press, this was through being copied by hand, usually, after the fall of the Roman Empire, by monks in monasteries (as imaginatively reconstructed in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*). In many cases – for example the later parts of Tacitus' *Histories*, for which Pliny

wrote his famous letter – Greek and Latin texts have been lost. In all cases, copying by hand results in mistakes of spelling, omitted words, etc. Most can easily be spotted and corrected, but dates and numbers are especially difficult. In the case of the standard text of Pliny's letter (see above), it is particularly easy to see how a mistake might have come about. Had the text originally read, say, *nonum kal. Novembres hora fere septima* ('nine days before the start of the ninth month, at about the seventh hour'), a scribe could easily have got confused between two words connected with nine and one with seven, writing instead 'nine days before the start of the seventh month, at about the seventh hour'. Confused? So was the monk! The confusion is worsened because September/October/November/December mean months 7/8/9/10 of a calendar originally starting in March.

So, all books on Pompeii, whether history or fiction, need to change the date of its destruction from 24 August to some date in A.D. 79 after 8 September, probably in autumn and more likely to be 24 October than any other individual date.

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Timechart

A.D. 79	
1 Jan.	Emperor Vespasian consul for the ninth time, Titus for the seventh time
23 June	Death of Vespasian. Titus becomes emperor, chief priest, <i>pater patriae</i>
1 July	Titus starts his ninth year of tribunician power
24 Aug.	Traditional date of eruption of Vesuvius
7/8 Sept.	Two independent documents show Titus to have received fourteen salutations as 'Victorious Commander'
After 8 Sept.	Titus saluted for the fifteenth time as 'Victorious Commander'
After that	Coin minted showing his updated titles
?24 Oct?	Coin buried in eruption of Vesuvius
A.D. 80	
1 Jan.	Emperor Titus consul for the eighth time